NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN HISTORY

June 2, 1986

Dear Josh:

Read your NYT letter and thought you might be interested some comments of mine on a symposium on the issue.

I was polite but the only real nay-sayer in the crowd when the editor of Sci, Tech & HV asked me to comment on excerpts from the meeting.

Yours,

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Commentary

Nathan Reingold

In the special section on the "President's Science Advisory Committee Revisited," William Golden's opening remarks glide by an interesting historical point—why his proposals were not literally accepted. There was no presidential science adviser appointed in 1950 or 1951, although Oliver E. Buckley and Lee A. DuBridge, two early chairmen of the Science Advisory Committee worked very hard to expand the role of the Committee. President Truman's action, in fact, occurred at a time when a National Science Foundation was being established, but in a form deliberately stripped of many attributes proposed by Vannevar Bush in *Science—The Endless Frontier.* Nor were there any intentions of establishing an "OSRD" for a new mobilization or for peacetime. The Advanced Research Projects Agency in DOD, I suppose, came closest to that option. But there appeared to be no intention of elevating science advice.

Only the Sputnik crisis, with its international implications reversed that trend. But those very origins guaranteed that PSAC and the Science Adviser would place a heavy focus on national security. George Kistiakowsky's published diary confirms that emphasis, even as it shows him also concerned about the health of the scientific enterprise in general, and other less spectacular issues arising from the civilian scientific agencies of the government—for example, health and environmental issues.

In short, I find the remarks in the Hofstra Conference to be very interesting and well-intentioned but somewhat beside the point. Prior to James Killian's appointment, there was real anger in some quarters of the scientific community over the lack of visible status and input—despite summer studies and the proliferation of nonprofit think tanks. The contrast with the status of economics—which had a Council of Economic Advisers in the White House—was quite galling and still arouses passions in some breasts. If we are talking about desired effective advice, there are many options open to any administration besides a PSAC. What has evolved now, as noted by several of the contributors to this issue, is an incredible structure of offices and committees, permanent and ad-hoc, within the executive branch, with a lesser proliferation in the Congress. The tight, snug little world described by our memoirists no longer exists. Reconstituting PSAC as such will not work.

The members of SAC and PSAC, of course, deserve credit for their accomplishments. Their labors, indeed the entire science advisory apparatus from Eisenhower to Nixon, rested, however, on several assumptions: (1) that "science" (or research) was a unity and that therefore a limited group of leaders could represent *all* issues and all constituencies; (2) that they could maintain an intellectual and administrative independence for "science" while serving whatever were the policies of the administration in power; and (3) that (following from the former) they could establish a harmony between the needs of the nation's research and development enterprise and the priorities of any administration. Severe restrictions exist in all three assumptions, especially today. A messy, pluralistic situation prevails which is not at all suitable for the kind of return-to-PSAC nostalgia displayed here. There is a real need for creative thinking in this important area of science policy and, it appears, a need for new models.

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